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several new tricks, seldom, as a matter of fact, recapture the secret which was Poe's supreme discovery—genuine “totality of effect.” As Professor Williams has abundantly illustrated with her diagrams, the present day story writer is nearly always driven to interweave several “lines of interest,” sometimes even two or more distinct dramatic conflicts, to secure his effect. A Poe story never has but one line of interest; and the master knew how to make that single line strong enough to carry his readers quite successfully to the desired goal. Surely the present is rather to be called the silver age of the short story, in spite of the clever contributors to our ingenious magazines; if for no other reason, because no such penetrating study of technique as this of Professor Williams' is ever produced in the golden age of a literary type.

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MARK TWAIN AND ADOLF WILBRANDT

When briefly referring to *Mark Twain's Letters*, in the February number of the *Notes*, p. 128, I mentioned a passage from a letter to William Dean Howells, written on December 30, 1898: “We saw the ‘Master of Palmyra’ last night.” I stated, “That is all, and the student asks in vain how Wilbrandt's highly significant drama impressed Mark Twain, whose love of the drama is sufficiently known.” It is true that in his letters the author has not said more about the play in question, but I overlooked the fact that as early as October, 1898, there appeared in *The Forum* one of Mark Twain's most seriously meant articles, entitled *About Play-Acting*, which can now be found in his collection *My Début as a Literary Person with other essays and stories*. The title of the essay is misleading enough, for it really contains an eulogy of Wilbrandt's dramatic poem together with some suggestions for the benefit of American theater-goers in general and of New Yorkers in particular.

Mark Twain objects to the term ‘play’ for Wilbrandt's “dramatisches Gedicht,” which he rightly characterizes as a departure from the common laws of the drama. It impresses him, nevertheless, as “a great and metaphysical poem, and deeply fascinating.” He even calls it Wilbrandt's masterpiece and the work which is to make his name permanent in German literature. This view of his agreed with nearly all the contemporary literary critics in Germany as well as abroad. Théodore Henckels in his *American*

college edition of Wilbrandt's work, 1900, writes, *e. g.*, "*Der Meister von Palmyra* is a masterpiece, full of symbolism and metaphysics, a veritable consolation to those who in the last twenty-five years have been much disconcerted by the realism of the German writers—a realism which had changed their ideas of Germany formed through their reading of the German poets and philosophers." And Robert F. Arnold in *Das Moderne Drama*, Strassburg, 1912, p. 52, calls it "das tiefste und schönste Epigonenstück," whatever that means. A thorough study of the *Meister von Palmyra* as an *Epigonenstück* has not yet been made.

To Mark Twain the strength of the whole piece lies in the "dash of metempsychosis"; it gave him "the sense of the passage of a dimly connected procession of dream-pictures." And as the chief actress is reincarnated several times, the absorbing fascination of the theater-goer is easily explained. "A number of curious and interesting features" add to this more sensational interest (1) Apelles' eternal youth as compared with the decay of age in men and scenery; (2) "Death, in person, walks about the stage in every act." And, as Mark Twain remarks, "and always its coming made the fussy human pack seem infinitely pitiful and shabby and hardly worth the attention of either saving or damning." The idea of perennial youth corresponded with one of Mark Twain's favorite fancies, as Albert Bigelow Paine tells us, that life should begin with old age and approach strong manhood, golden youth, to end at last with pampered and beloved babyhood. Or in the humorist's own words (*Letters*, p. 709): "It's an epitome of life. The first half of it consists of the capacity to enjoy without the chance; the last half consists of the chance without the capacity." Wilbrandt's Apelles also wanted to keep his youth, his strength, and his mental faculties unimpaired. That in the end he was fooled by his very desire, could only be pleasing to the gay satirist Mark Twain; and for the same reason he delighted in the contempt Wilbrandt's Pausanias, as "death, in person," showed for the frail human race. Mark Twain's letters to W. D. Howells, written on April 2nd and May 12th, 1899, sound like an accompaniment to the article on Wilbrandt.

After giving a synopsis of the different acts, Mark Twain drives his main point home. For there is no question of his not being interested in the *Meister von Palmyra* for merely literary reasons. He found the ethical lesson of it in complete harmony with his own world-view which, as we know, became decidedly pessimistic in the nineties. All kinds of hard experiences had saddened his life so as to make him prepared for Wilbrandt's metaphysical message. It goes without saying that afterwards he interpreted that piece according to his own spiritual needs. So when he writes: "This piece is just one long, soulful, sardonic laugh at human life. Its title might properly be "Is Life a Failure?" and leave the five

acts to play with the answer. I am not at all sure that the author meant to laugh at life. I only notice that he has done it." Mark Twain's doubt as to the German author's intention is verified by Master Apelles' words in the third scene of the last act:

"Nur der kann leben, der in andern lebt,
An andern wächst, mit andern sich erneut;
Ist das dahin, dann, Erde, tu dich auf,
Treib *neue Menschen* an das Licht hervor,
Und uns, *die Scheinlebendigen*, verschlinge!"

And in the very last scene it is promised and accorded

"Erlösung dem,
Der, lang geprüft, des Lebens Rätsel und
Des Todes Lehre fasste."

Wilbrandt has indeed not laughed at life, either cynically or despairingly; on the contrary, he did his very best as thinker and artist to solve the main riddle of life, viz., Life. Mark Twain in his peculiar way tried the same as is proved by the essay *What is Man?* and the story *The Mysterious Stranger*, the former being written in 1898 and the latter being started at least shortly after. It may be a mere coincidence that he wrote his two most important philosophic works at the time he was impressed so deeply by the *Meister von Palmyra*, but it is also possible that this "majestic drama of depth and seriousness" set his mind to work. Obviously he was in a responsive mood. Besides, impressive scenes in which Wilbrandt proved himself a clever observer of civilization with its hills and dales, a thorough student of man and a critic of heathens and Christians alike; characters like Aurelius and Septimius or the scoffer Timolaos who jokes his worthy neighbors about their "inherited ideas" and their doubtful "moral sense," to use Mark Twain's terminology, and, finally, passages on life and death or Longinus' truism, "So lass uns weise sein, um frei zu bleiben," will lead you into Mark Twain's gloomy avenues of life and thought, as depicted in *The Mysterious Stranger*, the scene of which is laid in an imaginary medieval Austrian village, Eselsdorf, the spiritual atmosphere of which is not so unlike that of Palmyra of Wilbrandt's creation. Mark Twain's "mysterious stranger" Philip Traum is of the same stuff Wilbrandt's "mysterious stranger" Pausanias is made of. The reader will surely find in *The Mysterious Stranger* as well as in *Der Meister von Palmyra* the "sense of the passage of a dimly connected procession of dream-pictures."

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